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Bucyrus

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In the center of Bucyrus, Ohio, there is a town square and two patches of grass roughly one hundred feet across that flank Sandusky Avenue. The Pelican Coffee House is to the south and the newest branch of Farmer Citizen's Bank to the north. The courthouse sits on the east block—in various states of repair—and two bars are to the west. This is the heart of the city, my hometown, the place where the native Wyandot, before the Europeans arrived, gathered to make maple syrup.

Bucyrus was named, so the legend goes, by combining the words *beautiful* and the name of the ancient Persian leader Cyrus the Great. It's a city both hated and loved by its residents. It's a Midwestern city with typical Midwestern drug problems, crisis of identity, and longing for its past. Through the middle of the 20th century the city was a productive, Midwestern hub. It was a symbol of progress. Where it once was a place of burgeoning industry, Bucyrus has since fallen on hard times. Much of the production from the previous century has slowed or halted. It recently ranked third in heroin overdoses in the state of Ohio.

Near the town square is a large mural, spanning the entire side of the Pelican Coffee House, that shows what the city looked like in its heyday during the Industrial Revolution. In the background you can see Thomas Edison, Harvey Firestone, and Henry Ford, who once stayed at the local

hotel for President Harding's funeral. Both Al Capone and Thomas Edison stayed when they passed through as well—fittingly, Capone stayed in a room below ground and Edison above. The hotel is now closed and most of what is left of the building sits unused. The mural images cling to greatness; the painting represents a time in the city's past when it was looking forward rather than backward, when it was filled with hope instead of resentment. The mural also portrays a vital artery of the Lincoln Highway that still runs through the center of town, but construction of a bypass that loops around the city rendered it useless.

That mural is made to give the effect of looking into the city's past, when there were just as many horse-drawn vehicles as there were horse-powered. The artwork is so realistic that it was nicknamed the "bird killer mural," due to the fact that birds fly into it and often die. With this mural the town square operates as a place stuck between present and past, a place that can't stop lingering, sitting in perpetual nostalgia.

The mural is one attempt at progress. It's an attempt to alter a vessel by filling it with something new, trying to rebuild a community once again. It's an attempt to look forward, to expect progress, not failure, even if the paint is meant to last just 100 years.

Bucyrus is the place that raised me. I was born in Bucyrus, metaphorically and physically. For 22 years, it was my home. It is where I went to school, where I went to church, where my family and many old friends still live. At 15, I had my first drink in the vacant half of the Ramseys' duplex at the end of Wiley Street. At 13, I smoked my first joint

by the Taco Bell dumpster. When I was 8, my family planted two maples in the side yard of my mother's house on Poplar Street. I went to school in the Norton Elementary building, named for Samuel Norton, the founder of the town. As a child, I sat on Sandusky Street curb and watched the Bratwurst Festival parade with my grandparents from their spot in the grass. They got the same spot every year by going the day before and laying out their lawn chairs on the ground.

Most of those things are gone now. The Ramseys' house was raided, the Taco Bell torn down and rebuilt with updates closer to the street, the bank seized my mother's house, and the new owners—in an over the top metaphor—tore the two Maples from the ground. Norton Elementary was razed and is now an empty lot.

Now that I have left, I see the city as an outsider would. I can get under its skin, as it was able to get under mine. I am able to explore it from somewhere other than the surface, able to see its inability to function as either town or city, to see how the place changes people, and how they change the place.

Bucyrus struggles with its identity, stuck between its "city" moniker and "town" feel, attempting to maintain its pride—the self-proclaimed "Bratwurst capital of America," even though that title is claimed by other places in the country as well.

It's a place that the senescent and (relatively) wealthy residents both respect and revile. One minute they condemn the numerous bars that pepper the city, and the next they relish the fact that Capone frequented

the underground speakeasies during prohibition. In fact, there is still a web of secret tunnels under the streets that gangsters used then, but most have been blocked off or demolished. I've wanted to explore those underground caverns and look through the relics since I was a child. Years ago, when the city built an addition to the outdated courthouse, I walked by the chain-link fence surrounding the construction and looked down to catch a glimpse of one of the passageways, my first real sight of the things I had heard so much about. I knew a family that had a pool table they pulled from the basement of The Crazy Fox and put in their attic. I used to shoot pool on it, with all its unnecessary adornment, and pretend that Capone had done the same. I still like to think he did. The construction was destroying the past. I wanted the tunnels preserved, but the city was growing beyond its past.

The Chamber of Commerce will put on a play for interested parties, one of the members even plays Capone himself. The basement where these scenes take place is also the basement of The Crazy Fox, one of the most notoriously sleazy bars in the city, with a sign hanging outside the door that reads, "Bikes. Chicks. Rods." The fact that actors are glorifying these scenes of debauchery while scenes of modern debauchery often occur in the room above them is most likely not discussed.

Like most insulated cities, gossip is rampant in Bucyrus. Every so often I will hear of an old friend that has overdosed or went to prison. "It's that town," I used to say. I'd condemn the place itself, as if it were the catalyst for that person's actions, because place molds us into who we are. Place shapes the people, who in turn shape the place, in a cycle that never

ends. Hopefully that shaping is for the positive, but that's not always the case. Those who live in Bucyrus talk of "downward spirals" and "quicksand." It's viewed as a social quagmire, in which every year you allow yourself to stay is another year you sink deeper. Every year it becomes harder to leave. The place works on you. This is partially it, but now I have to also think it is the people too, but where does that line end, the one between population and place?

I sometimes think about Mindy, a close friend who lived in Bucyrus, straight-A student, good at everything she tried, sports, friendships, subjects, whatever. But she started drinking a lot, disappearing, not talking to her friends, started stealing from people close to her. The, shortly after her twenty-first birthday, her mother found her body lying on the kitchen floor, blue and cold from an overdose. I think of how often this sort of thing happens. I think of Johnny, who went to war twice, came back, fueled himself into a drunken depression and ultimately shot himself in his apartment across from the VFW. I think of my high school teachers who all the students loved, but who was also a drunk, who got too close to a girl student after she graduated, who got pushed out of his job because of public opinion, who shot himself in his apartment behind city hall. I think of Justin, who some friends woke up one morning to find dead on their couch after a coke binge, leaving behind two young kids and a wife. I think of my life too. I think of where I would be had I not moved away, or where those people who sink deeper would be had something been different, had they had the ability or even the desire to leave.

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When I talk about Bucyrus I have trouble not referring to the city as a town. These are two different things entirely, the "town" and the "city." It is the residents themselves that make up the town. The town is the lifeblood of the city. The city is where the people live; the town is who those people *are*. The town is the being itself. The city is just a name, given so because it has (barely) enough people to qualify semantically (10,500 or so, but that number has been on the decline). Even the vernacular associated with the Midwestern city can't escape this confusion. That is why we call it the town square or the hometown, regardless of size. In all relevant aspects, Bucyrus is a town because "town" denotes some form of the familiar, of knowing one's neighbors, where "city" does not.

As of this writing, an online search for the word "church" gets 32 results, the city's website lists 40, and the historical center lists 56, all in a six-mile radius. A running joke when I was growing up was the Bucyrus had two things: bars and churches. People used to call it "Bar-Cyrus." And that's where people grow up in Bucyrus, some of us in bars, some in churches.

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Until I was about fifteen I attended one of those churches in Bucyrus, a loosely Pentecostal-based one. Services took place inside of what looked to be an old office building, with hand-painted wooden letters nailed to the front awning: *The Bucyrus Christian Center*. In many ways the place

was a microcosm of Bucyrus itself. Rumors abounded, everyone knew one another, the good and the bad, and, like the city, many of the congregation had roots in the South—left over from that great Scotch-Irish migration—or German ancestry. Even my own mother's family came from Appalachia, and before that, Scotland and Ireland.

Every Sunday morning and evening and every Wednesday evening I sat in one of the five rows of pews and listened to the sermon. Before the service, the preacher, Ted, and his wife, Vicky, sang while the assistant ministers and members of the congregation played the drums and guitars. And, like clockwork, my uncle George, a registered minister himself, would build up too, a cartoon character with steam shooting from his ears. Around the same time every service, George could no longer hold in his joy, and he would start running laps around the pews. Hands in the air, crying, screaming, "Bless you, Jesus."

Afterward, during the sermon, Ted, overweight and covered in sweat, would get so worked up that his face turned a deep red, and veins bulged from his forehead. He screamed his words in parody-like tones of the southern minister, the ends of sentences punctuated with a grunt.

Connie, a wiry, middle-aged mother of too-many-to-count, would talk in tongues, like a blend of Yiddish and Zulu. They called this "being taken over by the Holy Ghost," a moment of the body being possessed. It's explained in passive voice, maybe because the taken-over is a vessel, moved from the grammatical subject to the object. The Holy Ghost took over, and their (George's and Connie's) cups ranneth over.

There were many times when I was a child at the end of service that I went to the front when Ted asked if anyone needed prayer. Every time, Ted gave it his all, as if he was healing the blind. He laid his palm, slippery with anointing oil and sweat, on my forehead and prayed with just as much fury as he had for Ryan, the paraplegic toddler in the front row. But I did it for the attention, not because of the need. He pushed back on my head and said, "Bless this child," and spoke in tongues when it was time. Afterwards I went and kneeled at the tiny alter in front of the stage and pretended to pray, not really sure what to say.

I was the vessel. God, the substance, the filler. I, the filled.

On Sunday mornings as a teenager, after I graduated from the kids' Sunday School classes, I listened to the youth-minister discuss the dangers of drugs and speak of hellfire and damnation. It was meant to scare us into a life of servitude, and for many it worked. For the rest, it instilled a deep sense of unrest with the practices of the church. If the vessel is willing, though, it will easily fill. The passive versus the active. Our vices, our faith, our fear all the filler.

How easy it is to stay put, to continue with the things you know, to believe that which is comfortable, to not question. How hard it is to leave a place—the people, the memories—behind.

And maybe we stay because we find a home, no matter how much it alters. Bucyrus has been a largely Republican city with a nearly all-white (somewhere around 98%), manufacturing-based community. But those things have changed. See: General Electric (downsized), Bucyrus Precision

Tech (downsized), Baja Boats (relocated), Checkmate Boats (relocated), Swan Rubber (closed) Bucyrus Blades (downsized), Timken Bearings (downsized).

The older residents will remember that it used to be respectable to work at these plants. Not only was one of these factory jobs good, it was *desirable*. You could start a family, settle down, buy a house, and live out the rest of your days with a career and a mortgage in a peaceful, little town.

A divide exists now. Those with money hang on to what little wealth they have, the families whose names are still on the sides of buildings. The families who point out that the decline of the city started when minority families began moving in, even though the decline started long before. However, there is little evidence of this success left, as times get tougher and tougher.

Then there are the others, like my family. The Gallants have a reputation for being typical, redneck stereotypes. Government assisted, addicts, multiple marriages, in and out of prison, and so on, at least that's the outside view. In reality, much of this is true. My cousins have almost too many arrests to count, but these generalities miss the intimate details of the individual, choosing instead to see them as one cohesive body.

This is a divide between the poor and the poorer. These types of people, the well off and the less-well-off, exist in different places in the same town, but they avoid each other as much as possible, look at each other with contempt.

So, I ask myself, where do I come from? Is it the place or the

people? Would my family, had they grown up somewhere else, have done the things they've done, be the people they are? Would they still be my family as I know them now?

These things are a microcosm of the town.

The churches, the bars, the factories.

The vessel, once filled, alters.

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Talk to those who have left, and they will tell you that there is this pull that Bucyrus has on people, asking them back. And even though I don't believe much in the cosmic, there are those moments of doubt that make me believe. There are moments like when you say you don't believe in luck and then hesitate a half-beat before picking up a penny with its head to the ground, or you say you don't believe in ghosts, and yet you go up the basement stairs a few steps faster when the lights are off. There are moments when I want to go back, however brief, and get myself a mortgage and a career, taking up the factory life like so many before me. But I know those ideas are romantic ones of a place that no longer exists.

The town is the filler and the people the vessel.

I am old enough now to know that Ace Hardware used to be The Pharm and before that it was More-for-Less, and Neff's even before that. I'm old enough to remember where many demolished buildings used to be. I understand now why my grandmother called the convenience store by her house Lawson's instead of Dairy Mart, just as I find myself calling it Dairy

Mart instead of its new name.

When I was growing up, the city seemed different. It seemed more positive. Perhaps this is a product of age, or naivety, but now the youth have graduated from booze and pot to heroin. The place is riddled with the drug. And yet again there are small factions, religious groups and concerned citizens who are trying fight back, to win what looks like an unwinnable battle to change a place by force. Of course, I ask myself how much of this battle is just the city and how much should be attributed to something bigger, to something countrywide? How many places are there just like Bucyrus? Then the country the vessel, the city the substance.

Something unsurprising: Bucyrus is deeply rooted in the tradition of high school sports, especially football. But the team—still under the politically incorrect name, the "Bucyrus Redmen," or the confusing "Lady Redmen"—rarely performs well, worse than 400th in the state. They have a rivalry with Wynford, the "farm school," 1.5 miles down the road. Due to lack of funding, these schools will eventually merge into one, and yet residents are still weary of voting to pass school levies. Here are two different entities becoming one, two substances forced to fill the same vessel.

It seems too easy to say that the town manipulated me. It seems too easy to say that by moving away I was able to escape that manipulation, and yet here I am.

Why do we leave a place? How much of it sticks with us? How much of that town is coded in me? I think all of it, the good and the bad. I am a part of it and it a part of me.

Can I really blame the people who stay? Don't they see something in it? Don't we all have our vices, those things that we keep in our lives even though they are bad for us? Maybe that's it: Bucyrus is just another vice that shaped me. It is the habit I should kick but don't really want to. What is it doing for me? What am I doing for it? Neither of us benefits from one another and yet I continue to go back. I continue to explore.

During Christmas a few years back, I was in Bucyrus visiting family. My girlfriend and I were at my mother's new place that she was renting when she told me that my biological father lives somewhere in the county. I had always known he lived close, but this was the first time I heard her say it out loud. This is normally a topic we do not discuss. I know he has other children, but to think of them as real shook me.

Then, a few months later, I was back in town, inside the Shell station on Sandusky, when I saw someone out of the corner of my eye that I thought I recognized. When I got closer, I realized he looked more than a little like me. It was a coincidence, most likely, but in that one moment between awe and reason, I allowed myself to believe that I was staring at my half-brother, a son from the father I never met.

This is where Bucyrus exists, somewhere between reason and doubt. Somewhere on the peripherals of that city is another family I do not know. And every so often, things like this will boil to the surface of my everyday life. I leave the place but I cannot stop exploring. I can't stop wandering the speakeasies under the city. I look at the place from under the shiny surface, at the brick behind the murals. I let it get under my skin. I become the vessel.